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21 December 1997

Once again a computer-generated letter, and once again too late for Christmas, and probably New Year too. My excuse this time is that I just got back from Myanmar yesterday after being away for 7 weeks. I've spent most of the last 36 hours either asleep or doing some short-term consulting for Oliver's latest attempts to build a world-annihilating Lego castle.

The year started with a phone call from England: my father was in a coma in hospital in Birmingham. Twenty-four hours later I was there too (in the Birmingham hospital, not in the coma). We decorated Geoffrey's bedside with model trains, and anxiously awaited events. The doctors decided to give Geoffrey a spinal tap, and a crowd of medical students congregated around his bed to watch this uncommon medical procedure. But just as the extra-large needle approached, he woke up. The needle was put away, and the doctors and students dispersed—somewhat to their disappointment, I imagine. Amazingly, and thankfully, Geoffrey has now made a full recovery.

To celebrate, my mother arranged a surprise 70th birthday party for him in June. We all congregated in the village hall in Herefordshire, and he was lured in on some implausible pretext. We sang Happy Birthday as he came through the door. He hadn't suspected a thing, even though my mother had arranged everything by phone in his full hearing. I am worried: have I inherited my mother's deviousness or my father's obliviousness?

My third trip of the year to the UK was in August, to witness my brother Laurence's wedding in the Trossachs, a particularly scenic part of Scotland. The weather was perfect, and Laurence and Tracey said Yes at the right times and to the right people. The morning of the wedding I caddied for the bride's father and a group of other golf addicts. I wore a sarong around the golf course as I didn't want to get my trousers wet. The golfers seemed to mind this less than the fact that I was scrupulously honest in keeping score. Evelyn missed the wedding as Oliver had just started a new school in Germany. But she was happy to have been far away when she learned that I had gone around in Scotland in a sarong.

My sister Elizabeth had an even better excuse for not attending the wedding: she was nine months pregnant. The day after the wedding came the news that Daisy had a new brother, so my sister Annabelle (over from Australia for the wedding) and I drove down to Hampshire to confirm this. The rumours were correct. At the check-up two weeks before the birth, the baby (since named John) had been the wrong way round in the womb. "Caesarean", said the doctor. Liz went to an acupuncturist instead, who applied moxibustion: holding a burning cigar of Chinese herbs near to her little toe. After three tries, the baby turned round, and was born normally and the right way round a few days later.

Being a freelance consultant is like our shower was in the Philippines: either lots of very hot water, or a dribble of cold. We're either very busy, or very worried. The first six months of 1997 were a dribble: I finished off some editing and desktop publishing work, learned how to prepare web pages, and tried to avoid the bank manager. The last six months have been hectic: trips to the USA, Kenya, Ethiopia and India (for Evelyn), and the Netherlands, Denmark, Myanmar, India, and Myanmar again (for me).

So Evelyn and I have spent much of the year playing tag. We have tried to juggle our timetables so that at least one of us is always in Germany to be with Oliver. We have failed. Oliver spent three weeks in November with his grandparents in Gladbach while we were both away in India. He enjoyed himself so much that on Evelyn's return he didn't want to come home. His grandparents' reaction is unknown.

Oliver, now 11, has moved from primary into secondary school. He's made the switch from Filipino English to German, and now claims not to understand me when I try to help him with his maths homework in English. I think he makes the same excuse at school for German. He has joined the choir (despite, rather than because of, the fact that the 4 boys are vastly outnumbered by the girls). I'm sorry to say I missed their performance of Dracula last week, but I think I've heard all the songs in unofficial auditions since.

Evelyn spent part of March at a conference in Seattle, and most of July in Ethiopia and Kenya, doing a consultancy for the International Livestock Research Institute. She came back very relaxed after three weeks away from us. Oliver and I both gained weight while she was away.

My first trip to Myanmar in September was preceded by a couple of weeks' work for CARE in Denmark, running a workshop on conservation and development. I was looking forward to a week on the beach, but the weather was freezing and a gale blew in from the North Sea. I was due to go straight from Copenhagen to Yangon, but only just made it: my passport and Myanmar visa arrived an hour before I was due to leave for the airport; my ticket arrived with half an hour to spare.

Myanmar is probably the fourth-worst governed country in the world, ranking somewhere after Afghanistan, North Korea and Iraq. The primary schools (yes, the primary schools) have recently been reopened after 6 months of closure because of fears of unrest. The universities remain closed. Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the last elections and was promptly arrested, is still under virtual house arrest.

Myanmar is a fascinating country nevertheless. Gilded stupas rise like huge golden needles into the sky; the ruined pagoda complexes of Bagan stand like all the cathedrals of Europe plonked down in one place on the banks of the Ayeyarwady. In one pagoda, I tried to stick 30-cents-worth of gold leaf onto a gilded Buddha statue. Unfortunately it didn't stay put: I got more on my fingers than on the statue. (Despite my efforts, the gold didn't stick to my fingers either.)

Notwithstanding all the gold, Myanmar is very poor, and very isolated. I had had my doubts about working there, but was convinced after seeing some of the villages where the UNDP project I was working for has activities: slowing soil erosion, improving farmers' incomes, improving the very rudimentary health care, and stopping the AIDS now spreading from Thailand and through the Golden Triangle drug trade.

In November, Evelyn and I both went to Pune in India to help run a conference on ethnoveterinary medicine. The conference went very smoothly, with many friends from around the world happily talking about medicinal herbs and castration techniques. After the conference came a workshop on camel diseases, where participants wrote and rewrote articles on scabies, pox and lice. It's such fun to be married to a veterinarian.

Evelyn returned to Germany from Pune to rescue her parents from Oliver, but I went on to Myanmar. This time my ticket arrived 24 hours early. At least the trend is in the right direction.

All this travel may sound exotic, but it gets very tiring. I look forward to getting home and unpacking my suitcase. Evelyn and Oliver want to travel, though, so in August we went camping with Evelyn's brother's family in South Tyrol. Wonderful weather. The highlight of the week was not the walking in the Alps, the visits to ruined castles, or the trip up to the summer skiing area on the Stilfersjoch glacier (where we felt very under-dressed among all the ski jocks). No, it was when we talked our way across the border into Switzerland without passports, despite the border guard's suspicious glances into the back of the car at Oliver and his cousins. He obviously thought we were engaged in child smuggling. He let us through when the children started talking German. Loud cheers from the back of the car as we drove away. Once in Switzerland, we had the problem of how to get back into Italy again at another checkpoint. We sped through the checkpoint as the border guard turned away to scratch his nose. Renewed cheers from behind.

The different nationalities in the campsite were interesting. The Dutch rented pitches on the edge of the camp, sat behind their caravans and ignored everyone else. The Germans came in campers fitted with electric barbecues, freezers and satellite TV. No roughing it for them. The Italians travelled in groups; they rented four or five pitches next to each other, and set up huge tent complexes with communal tables at which they drank and sang raucously, keeping the Germans and Dutch awake until late into the night.

In the pitch next to us was the Perfect Family. We got up at 7:00 each morning and after much preparation and argument were ready to leave for the day's hike at 9:00. Next door, the Perfect Family rose at 7:30, had a quiet, harmonious breakfast, and left before 8:15. We got back from our hike with aching legs and cantankerous children; the Perfect Family returned in tranquillity and half an hour later departed again for the swimming pool. We took two hours to cook our evening meal, then tried to maintain peace until bedtime; the Perfect Family took 25 minutes and later settled down to a harmonious family game of Ludo—at which everyone took turns at winning.

We consoled ourselves for our failings by assuring ourselves that our lives were more interesting than Mr and Mrs Perfect's.

What of next year? The travel begins on 7 January with a trip to Kenya, followed by possible visits to Myanmar and Uganda. When, oh when, will I ever get round to finishing off that book on camels?

With very best wishes for Christmas and the New Year from all three of us,

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver